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C O R R E C T E D COPY - ADDING "SENSITIVE" HANDLING CAPTION
SENSITIVE

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E.O. 12958: N/A
TAGS: [EAIR](#) [PREL](#) [MASS](#) [CASC](#) [GB](#) [FR](#)
SUBJECT: GABON: EIGHT FRENCH SOLDIERS DIE IN HELICOPTER
CRASH

Summary

¶1. (U) A French military helicopter crashed off the Gabonese coast January 17, killing eight of ten French military personnel aboard. The Cougar helicopter had just lifted off from the French amphibious assault ship La Foudre, in Gabon for a bilateral training exercise. French President Nicolas Sarkozy dispatched Defense Minister Herve Morin to Libreville in response to the crash. Morin told the press the causes of the crash were not yet known. The Ambassador and the Defense Attache will attend memorial services for the victims January 20 and 21. End Summary.

Nighttime Crash

¶2. (U) As widely reported in the international press, a Eurocopter AS 532 Cougar crashed off the coast of Gabon late in the evening on January 17, soon after lifting off from the French amphibious assault ship La Foudre. A total of eight soldiers are confirmed dead and two are confirmed survived. Both survivors are in local hospitals.

¶3. (U) The helicopter crashed into Atlantic waters 50 kilometers off the small town of Nyonie, between Libreville and Port Gentil. The La Foudre was the first on the scene, arriving 30 minutes after the crash, and rescued three survivors, one of whom later died of his injuries at the hospital. The La Foudre, two helicopters, three ships and an underwater robot contributed By French oil company Total participated in the search effort.

¶4. (U) The helicopter was discovered in water 35 meters deep, and five bodies were discovered in it. Two bodies were later discovered nearby, and the final eighth body was discovered on January 19.

¶5. (U) Four French soldiers on the helicopter crew were assigned to French Forces in Gabon (FFG) located at Camp De Gaulle in Libreville. The six others were commandos assigned to the 13th Regiment of Dragon Paratroopers. The helicopter was participating in a French-Gabonese bilateral training exercise, Operation Ngari. The exercise was scheduled for January 17-21, and involved 600 French soldiers and 120 Gabonese troops.

French and Gabonese Response

¶7. (U) News of the crash was first released by the office of French president Sarkozy. In response to the crash, Sarkozy

sent Defense Minister Herve Morin to Libreville January 18. Morin overflew the crash site, met Gabonese President El Hadjj Omar Bongo Ondimba, and consulted with Gabon-based French military officials. Following his meeting with Bongo, Morin told the press that the cause of the crash has not yet been established.

¶8. (U) Morin also announced that there would be a French judicial inquest and a separate investigation by the French Defense Ministry. French gendarmes and a French air accident expert would participate in the probes, Morin said. The French military also reportedly grounded all 17 Cougar transport helicopters as a precautionary measure. The Cougars have been in service an average of 16 years each.

¶9. (SBU) Gabonese Defense Minister Ali Bongo told the press that Gabon had provided logistical and medical assistance to the search and rescue operation. We have not yet determined whether Gabonese maritime or air assets were deployed in response to the crash, but no such assistance has been mentioned in local or international press reports.

¶10. (U) The Ambassador and the Defense Attache will attend memorial services for the victims of the crash on January 20 and 21. As best we can determine so far, no Gabonese maritime or air assets were deployed in response to the crash. Libreville-based French military forces helped evacuate American citizens and others from Chad in February ¶2007. The loss of these troops is keenly felt within the tight knit French military community here.
REDDICK